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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CARC

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM GG

SUBJECT: IRAKLI BATIASHVILI-BACK IN POLITICS?

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) In a January 29 meeting with Poloffs, Irakli Batiashvili, recently amnestied from Georgian prison on January 11, said that he sees his role as a coordinating force for the opposition prior to the Parliamentary elections, although he has not decided where in the spectrum of the opposition parties that he lies. He said that the tapes which were used during his trial as evidence of his cooperation with rebels in the Kodori Valley were doctored, and could present the tapes and the text in its entirety to demonstrate this point. Batiashvili underscored his close working relationship with the U.S. government during the 90's when he was the Head of the State Security Service and was seeking positive dialogue with post to prevent, what he alleged was fraud during the Presidential elections. Batiashvili portrayed the Saakashvili administration as authoritarian, pointing to eavesdropping on private citizens, illegal expropriation of property, and failure to engage with civil society or other actors. He assessed that anti-Americanism would continue as long as Saakashvili was president, although he expressed deep appreciation and for the U.S. contributions during Georgia's darkest moments. Batiashvili was not surprised that the Public Defender did not consider him a political prisoner, saying the Public Defender was a government employee and although he may have thought differently personally, publicly he could not say otherwise. He was aware that Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch had expressed interest in his case and would feature information about him in their annual reports, but was unsure if they considered him a political prisoner. Batiashvili agreed that an opposition lead deadlock in Parliament wouldn't be beneficial to anyone, and expressed his interest in working on territorial integrity, NATO entry, and prevention of terrorism as nonpartisan issues that both sides could agree on. End Summary.

The Man and his Past

¶2. (C) Batiashvili introduced himself by citing his work as a dissident in the 80's and his involvement with the National Liberty Movement to fight for Georgia's independence against the Soviet totalitarian empire. During the Shevardnadze period, he was appointed Head of the State Security Forces, and described his relationship then with the U.S. as a close and productive one. He went on to talk about the reform of the Georgian intelligence services and his role in revamping aged tactics and weaponry through the U.S. train and equip program. Batiashvili said as a result of this collaboration, the elite Omega "spetznaz" Unit was created. (Comment: He most likely is referring to paramilitary forces which were assigned to the State Security Service. End Comment.) Batiashvili portrayed himself as a strong proponent of NATO, citing his subsequent advocacy work with the Georgian Parliament to oversee Georgia's movement toward NATO. Batiashvili described the Abkhazia war as a very difficult

time in Georgia's history, but as a result of this time, he established contacts within the Kodori Valley. These are the same contacts, he maintains, that he was in communication with when he was arrested.

His Trial and Tribulations

¶3. (C) Batiashvili said that his arrest and imprisonment were not legal and that Georgian society knew this. He described his contact with Enzar Kvitsiani in the Kodori Valley which led to his arrest as an attempt to find a peaceful solution to a difficult problem. Batiashvili said during the 90's, he often made trips to the region, and knew the people and the situation there very well. It would not have been unusual, he contended, to meet and talk with figures in seeking a peaceful solution. Batiashvili was against using the army in the Kodori Gorge from the beginning, and if more moderate forces had prevailed (he stated Burjanadze) then mediation would have diffused the situation quite quickly. He went on to say that the tapes which were used against him in his trial were doctored, and that the government admitted as much in an official letter to him. Batiashvili expressed willingness to produce the tapes and transcripts of the five conversations in their entirety should Post want to review them. He said that prison authorities and other prisoners never harmed or abused him while he was incarcerated, as they had respect for him. Batiashvili stated that all judicial proceedings with his case are finished. He was initially sentenced to 24 years, under two different articles, and several times he had been offered a plea bargains and other deals, which he steadfastly refused.

TBILISI 00000141 002 OF 002

¶4. (C) Batiashvili respected the Public Defender and appreciated his efforts on his behalf. He was not surprised that the Public Defender did not consider him a political prisoner, saying how could a government employee publicly say otherwise. Batiashvili was aware that Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International was studying his cases, but was not aware at this point whether they classified him a political prisoner. Upon his release, he said the Georgian Patriarch, and Nino Burjanadze asked him not to attend the opposition protest on January 13, but said not to have would have looked like fear and attended anyway. Batiashvili described his reception at the protest as unexpectedly warm and supportive.

His Current Role

¶5. (C) While Batiashvili would not confirm that he was running for office in the Parliamentary Elections, he saw his raison d'etre as a coordinating force for the United Opposition. He attributes his activism to a deep seated skepticism of the Saakashvili regime and portrayed it as authoritarian, asserting the government's tapping of telephones as something indicative of a totalitarian regime afraid to lose its grip on power. He said incidents of phone tapping and kidnapping (he cited Koba Davitashvili specifically) instill a sense of fear in the populace and in this culture of intimidation, democracy cannot flourish. Batiashvili said that the spring would be tense in Tbilisi, due to elections and that in general, spring "is an emotional time for Georgians." If 100,000 people showed up to protest in November, he speculated with warmer weather and milder conditions, would this mean 300,000 people would turn out? Batiashvili said he has no desire for another revolution and wants the Parliamentary Elections to be conducted in a peaceful atmosphere.

Anti-Americanism-Tied to Saakashvili

¶6. (C) Batiashvili said that Anti-Americanism will continue

as long as Saakashvili is president, and could possibly grow during his next five years in office. He realized that the U.S. government position was the support of democracy as an institution, rather than an individual person or party, but some Georgians are ungrateful and have already forgotten what the U.S. has done to assist Georgia in its darkest hours. PolEcon Chief expressed appreciation for his comments but concern that the opposition does not fuel the anti-Americanism as a tool to increase its own popularity. Batiashvili said this anti-American sentiment was not widespread among Georgians, who see their future as part of NATO and welcome U.S. assistance towards this end.

His Future Plan

¶ 17. (C) PolEcon Chief encouraged Batiashvili to consider areas of mutual interest in which the opposition can work with the government, such as NATO integration. She also cautioned on the importance of continuing reforms, even if a new Parliament has many more members of the opposition. Batiashvili agreed for Georgia to move ahead, both sides must forge a multi-party state. One of his biggest criticisms of the current government was the lack of a check on executive power. Although there are large areas of disagreement between both sides, he did concede that three nonpartisan areas which could unite both groups were territorial integrity, fight against terrorism, and entry into NATO. He specifically noted that he appreciated the positive role of the U.S. in promoting dialogue to resolve the status of disputed territories, an issue which he considered close to his heart and for which he was ready to fight.

Comment

¶ 18. (C) Batiashvili considers himself a sharp, fit opponent of Saakashvili, and attributes his release to one of the opposition's initial demands to release political prisoners in November. Behind the scenes, the Georgian Orthodox Patriarch, who depicts itself as apolitical, appears to have been influential in Batiashvili's release and political participation, indicating we believe the concern the Patriarch has about the actions of some radical elements that are coming out of the opposition.

TEFFT